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SUBJECT: ARMENIA: MEDIA REACTION TO U.S. RESPONSE TO REFERENDUM

SUMMARY

1. U.S. Embassy Yerevan posted a response to Armenia's November 27 constitutional referendum on its website based upon cleared press guidance from the Department. The response received extensive coverage in the Armenian press. Reports varied, with some outlets presenting the response as questioning the legitimacy of the referendum results, some portraying the response as less critical of the results, and one outlet calling the response "balanced." One pro-government newspaper quoted the GOAM press secretary as complaining that the U.S. response was "incorrect" in that the Central Election Commission (CEC), not the GOAM, reports voter turnout figures. END SUMMARY.

SOME SOURCES PRESENT RESPONSE AS QUESTIONING THE RESULTS...

2. Some media outlets presented the U.S. response as questioning the legitimacy of the results of the referendum. "Armenia Liberty," RFE/RL's Armenian Service, published an article on its website entitled "U.S. Echoes Questions About Armenian Poll Result." The article states, "The United States joined European observers on Tuesday in raising serious questions about the credibility of the official results of Armenia's weekend constitutional referendum..." The article quotes the U.S. response as saying, "We share the regret of the Council of Europe, whose observers called into serious question the voter turnout figures for the referendum reported by the Armenian Government." RFE/RL's main website drew a similar conclusion about the text. The article states, "The U.S. State Department's Bureau of Europe and Eurasian Affairs expressed similar concerns [to those of the Council of Europe] in a statement released on 29 November. The statement, which was posted on the website of the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan, calls upon the Armenian government 'to investigate Council of Europe observer reports of serious abuses and fraud.'"

...WHILE OTHERS PORTRAY IT AS LESS CRITICAL OF THE VOTE

3. Other media outlets presented the U.S. response as less critical of the referendum results. Azg, a center-right daily, stated, "The constitutional amendments are supported by European organizations as well as the U.S. This must be the reason why the West, the advocate of democratic values, closed its eyes to flagrant falsifications of the November 27 vote." "Mediamax," an independent news agency that is considered pro-government, published the full text of the U.S. response with the subtitle, "U.S. recognizes the substance of the provisions considered by the referendum as potentially strengthening democratic institutions in Armenia."

NEWSPAPER CALLS REACTION "BALANCED" BUT REMAINS CRITICAL

4. "Haykakan Zhamanak," a tabloid daily, published an article stating, "It can be said that the State Department's statement was 'balanced,' as was the statement of the Council of Europe monitors: three items refer to violations committed during the voting, and three note the bright future that will be realized as a result of collaboration with President Kocharian." The newspaper, however, remained critical of the United States and the Council of Europe for supporting the amendments. The article states, "But as it has already been mentioned, western countries with objective reasons have given up on the opposition, and thus are condemned to collaborating with President Kocharian. This is the only explanation for why the United States and the Council of Europe have stated that they cannot evaluate the results of the referendum until it is clear how many people voted. Instead, they are talking about the 2007-2008 elections and international standards. This means that if the Armenian people tolerate the results of this collaboration between the West and President Kocharian, the same situation will be repeated during the 2007-2008 elections, and this collaboration might continue indefinitely."

15. "Hayots Ashkhar," a pro-government daily, quoted the Government of Armenia press secretary as complaining that, according to Armenian law, voter turnout is determined by the CEC, not the GOAM as the U.S. Embassy text stated. The article says that, according to the press secretary, the GOAM and the CEC are different state bodies and the government is not authorized to publicize the results of the referendum. (Note: Members of the CEC are government employees and their salaries are paid from the state budget. The U.S. Embassy added a footnote to its response stating, "Specifically, the Armenian Central Election Commission reports voter turnout figures for the referendum." End Note.)

EVANS